

1.13 BROAD CHARACTER: UNIMPROVED GRAZING

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE: EAST ANGLIA

1.13.1 CHARACTER TYPE: COASTAL ROUGH GROUND

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING/DISTINGUISHING ATTRIBUTES

Coastal rough ground, incorporating rough grassland, scrub and heathland, is present along stretches of the coastline within the Region. This type of landscape is the product of thousands of years of human activity.

Perhaps the most significant area of coastal rough ground in East Anglia falls within the region known as the 'Sandlings' present along the Suffolk coast between Southwold and Ipswich. This is defined by its acidic soil and particular cultural uses, most notably livestock grazing. Large areas of heath are present in the Sandlings region and these are characterised by the relatively limited number of species present and domination by heather (known as ling in East Anglia). Where natural tree growth occurs these are dominated by elm due to the exposed coastal location (Williamson 2006).

Other smaller areas of coastal rough ground occur within the study area, most notably rough grassland around the Great Oakley/Hamford Water area and scrub on the Landguard peninsula.



Part of the 'Sandlands' area at Dunwich Heath

HISTORICAL PROCESSES; COMPONENTS, FEATURES AND VARIABILITY

Coastal rough ground in this region is usually represented by areas which would naturally be under tree-cover.

Heathland in particular is formed on areas of sandy soil. These are easy to cultivate and were therefore attractive to early farmers with primitive technology (Williamson 2006, 174). The combination of acid soils and grazing pressure encourages a process known as 'podzolisation' in which organic matter and minerals are leached out of the soil (ibid). This subsequently allows the development of the characteristic underscrub vegetation dominated by heather and inhibits woodland regeneration.

It is likely that much of the Sandlings area was cleared of trees by late Prehistory (Williamson 2005, 53) and used for cultivation and most significantly intensive grazing. Pollen evidence from excavations at Sutton Hoo indicate extensive clearances in the Bronze Age and evidence for podzolisation in the Iron Age (Williamson 2006, 175). Although, place-name evidence suggests that areas of woodland may still have existed in the area into the Anglo-Saxon period (ibid) the Sandlings would have been an area of almost unbroken heath throughout much of this period.

Traditionally the heathland was used for intensive grazing, maintaining its character by not allowing natural processes to convert the land back into woodland. Sheep are more suited to this type of landscape than cattle and dominated the Sandlings from at least the medieval period up to the 20th century with over 1000 recorded on Friston Hall Estate in the 1690s (Williamson 2005, 56). In particular the process of 'folding', where sheep were grazed on the heath during the day and folded into arable fields to manure at night, was extensively practised in this region.

Other processes and practises which shaped the landscape in this area include the harvesting of the natural vegetation for fuel, thatch and animal husbandry, and warrening (rabbit farming). It is traditionally thought that rabbits were introduced to Britain after the Norman Conquest but this view has recently been challenged by recent archaeological evidence, most notably (in this region) from an excavation at Lynford (Norfolk) which found evidence for butchered rabbits in early Roman layers suggesting that they may have been present or introduced as early as or even as part of the Roman conquest. Exploitation of rabbits was certainly well underway by the medieval period and evidence for their management, in particular large artificial warrens (pillow mounds) often survives in open heathland areas (ibid, 59).

Heathland would therefore have appeared more managed in the medieval and post medieval periods (ibid, 60). The current landscape was ultimately a product of a number of processes which changed this system of land use. Initially cattle were favoured over sheep due to declining prices and changes in agriculture generally. Most significantly large areas of heath were turned over for permanent cultivation. This process began in the 18th century but became widespread after WW2 when arable cultivation dramatically increased to boost the economy.

Today what is left of the heath in this area is still grazed but also forms an important natural resource in the area.

VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS

Coastal rough ground is important in the region for a number of reasons. The heathland in particular is viewed as a valuable asset in terms of its beauty and its importance to wildlife. As such, an entire region covering 403 square kilometres is known as the 'Suffolk Coast and Heaths'. In 2010 the area celebrated its 40th anniversary as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) – chosen for the distinctiveness and quality of its 'natural' environment. The area has three long distance walkways including a 'Sandlings path' through the heathland.

Coastal rough ground as a whole has value to the local community as a recreation area adjacent to the sea. For example the area around Landguard peninsula is also used for walking and enhances the landscape around the Landguard Fort Scheduled Ancient Monument. Undeveloped land in the coastal zone is increasingly valued for this purpose.



Heath along the roadside in Suffolk

RESEARCH, AMENITY AND EDUCATION

The coastal rough ground in this region is vital for understanding past human land use. The landscape itself is a product of a very specific type of human activity as described above. The Sandlings is one of only a few remaining areas of ancient heathland whose very presence represents a way of life that has all but disappeared (<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-heathland>).

The landscape type is also important in terms of its potential for research and education with regards to its ecological system and wildlife.

The Sandlings region is particularly important for coastal access and the tourism which sustains the area, attracting visitors from throughout the British Isles and abroad. In particular, this is an important area for walkers and for wildlife watching. There is potential for man's impact on this landscape type to be further emphasised within this tourist industry.

CONDITION AND FORCES FOR CHANGE

In the last century change has occurred through increased cultivation of traditionally grazed land and wide-scale establishment of conifer plantations, as well as pressure for development along the coast, including the construction of military facilities such as airfields. As such much heathland in particular has disappeared.

This is compounded by the natural processes which tend to act on unmanaged heathland. The process of clearance described can be subject to reverse if landscapes lose their traditional grazing regime and the heath once more starts to turn to and thence to woodland where the vegetation will stabilise. Nevertheless this regressive process can often be hindered in coastal heathlands by sea spray and across all areas of heathland by previous podaliation.

In contrast a number of forces are now working towards increased protection of coastal rough ground and reversing the decline of heathland. This includes the UN Convention on Biodiversity (1992) which led to the 1994 UK Biodiversity Action Plan in which lowland heathlands were identified as a priority habitat with targets set for their conservation and recreation. Many heaths were given statutory protection at this time. In this region this process is mainly represented by the Suffolk Biodiversity Action Plan.

It is currently unclear what impact the Marine and Coastal Access Bill will have on this landscape. However the presence of several coastal paths already existing in the area suggests this process may be relatively smooth.

RARITY AND VULNERABILITY

There is very little ancient heathland surviving in England (see <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-heathland>). Therefore this area of the East Anglian coast is very important and is recognised as such by its designation as an AONB and a Heritage Coast. Dunwich heath in particular supports rare localised plant and invertebrate communities.

The Landguard peninsular, incorporating the areas of scrub, is also designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) on account of the number and quality of shingle-dwelling plant species and its importance as a land-fall site for migrating birds.

Whilst coastal rough ground has been at risk in recent years this risk has now receded with recognition that this is an important landscape type and much is now being done to reverse its decline and maintain its character .

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Williamson, T., 2006, *England's Landscape: East Anglia*. English Heritage

Websites

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